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Homage to Michel Fabre

Seminars of the research project *Performing Straight White Masculinities*

Institut du Monde Anglophone, Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle —
Paris III, December 12th, 2008 and March 13th, 2009.

Claire Conilleau



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1 **Project Leaders:**

- Professor Hélène Quanquin, Associate Professor/Maître de conférences of American Civilization at Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle—Paris III
- Professor Raphael Costambeys-Kempczynski, Senior Lecturer/Maître de conférences, Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle—Paris III.

2 **Speakers** (following order of presentation):

- Malcolm Cowburn (Principal Lecturer, Sheffield Hallam University)
- Alexis Matza (PhD student, University of Iowa)
- Pierre-Antoine Pellerin (PhD student, U. Paris III)
- Marianne Kac-Vergne (PhD student, U. Poitiers)
- Hélène Quanquin (Associate Professor, U. Paris III)
- Ariane Blayac (PhD student, U. Paris III)
- Sophie Chapuis (PhD student, U. Paris III)
- Charles Holdefer (Novelist and Lecturer, U. of Poitiers)
- Anne Guiraud (PhD student, U. Paris III)

3 The stakes and framework of this research project are to bring together researchers from various fields, backgrounds and institutions, including PhD students, to explore the social construct of “masculinity” (E. Anthony Rotundo), its whys and wherefores, independently from gender studies, from which it stems.

December 12th, 2008

Performing Masculinities: Experience and Representation

- 4 The inaugural speaker for the seminar delivered a talk entitled: “Beyond the ‘Folk Devil’: Male Sex Offenders, ‘Beasts’, ‘Pervs’ or Men?”. Malcom Cowburn, who is Principal Lecturer in Criminology, founded Masculinity Studies at Bradford and was a probation officer for adult male sex offenders for over a decade. Thus, his approach to sex offending is multilayered. He set out to understand, both psychologically and sociologically, how the representations in the media of white adult males’ sexual violence shape our thinking of men, male behaviors, and male sex offenders in the context of community safety. He thus retraced the creation and function of ‘folk devils’ (reminiscent of the scapegoat in Greek drama) by focusing on the figure of the ‘paedophile’ and the phenomenon of ‘moral panics’ (notably developed by S. Cohen) by investigating the analytical context in which the concept of ‘moral panics’ operates. Malcom Cowburn’s presentation posits that the social representation of the sexual offender – often at odds with reality, as statistics and data confirm – functions as a diversion from the more serious issues, such as dangerous families and incest. This study deconstructed the patterns and cyclicity of ‘moral panics’ which act as a strategy to skirt around social taboos and thus maintain hegemony.
- 5 Alexis Matza’s “Maskulinity: The Strategic Use of Gender by Men” is at the intersection of ethnography, technology and gender studies. Based on the assumption that there are several layers of ideal and real masculinity and on field interviews in the Boston area, it focused on how masculinity is handled as a *persona*, or *mask*, by all males, from straight men, cisgender men (alignment between biological and social identities) to the ‘metrosexual’ and transgender ones. These are key concepts to apprehend how men can invoke gendered conventions in order to *pass as men*, and even alter their bodies to cohere with such expectations via “temporary affiliation markers”. Engaging with such conventions inherently points to the paradox of (in)visibility for men (fitting in with one’s peer group or making an activist statement).
- 6 Finally, Pierre-Antoine Pellerin probed Jack Kerouac’s “Masculinity on the Road: Homosociality in *Visions of Cody* and *On the Road*.” These two Beat literature staples present a compelling questioning of normative masculine identity (refusing work, marriage and fatherhood) by exploring the margins of American postwar society. But a set of highly codified behaviors, rituals and practices constantly reiterated come to replace the norms of “square” masculinity these characters had so intently run away from. In this homosocial chronotope, the characters constantly have to prove their masculinity: their physical strength, defiance of the law, and “jive talk” among others all serve to construe a stable picture of masculinity, further stabilized by the enforcement of heteronormativity. Kerouac’s novels seem to emphasize the performative value of masculinity and present a revolution, in the etymological sense, with the protagonists eventually returning home.
- 7 To view the full seminar’s recordings online: http://www.isorbonne.fr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=243:research-seminar-masculinities&catid=65:chaine-384&Itemid=116

March 13th, 2009

Morning session – Performing Masculinities & Conflict/Power: Critical Theory

- 8 Marianne Kac-Vergne's presentation, "The History of Masculinity and Men's Studies: Historiography and Social Movements from the Postwar until Today", outlined six major phases in US society. "Sex role theory", which was prevalent until the 1970s, gave rise to men's movements and an intensifying backlash against feminism that culminated in the post-Cold War era. This resulted in a growing anxiety surrounding masculinity, which social movements exploited to shore up a hegemonic masculinity by rejecting feminism and its relative gains. At the opposite end of the spectrum, in academia, a more progressive view of masculinity emerged and enabled the creation of "men's studies" whose proponents have consistently distanced themselves from sex role theory and taken the hegemonic nature of masculinity and its resulting inequalities into account. The definition of masculinity itself is at the crux of this gap between progressive pro-feminist men voicing analyses of masculinity in the academic field and social movements exacting a vision of masculinity they feel has been undermined by decades of feminism.
- 9 The central question to men's studies departing from gender studies since the 1990s has been to examine and account for the assertion of a given power structure, which gender role theory has failed to do as it identifies the social structure with biological difference. Thus, the concept of Hegemonic Masculinity was formulated by R.W. Connell, from A. Gramsci's Cultural Hegemony, and paved the way to new critical approaches. Hélène Quanquin thus presented close readings of influential articles by R.W. Connell and Messerschmidt, and subsequent criticism by D. Demetriou, J. Hearn and G.W. Walker, which all discuss, question and rethink the concept of Hegemonic Masculinity and related concepts such as Protest Masculinity.
- 10 Ariane Blayac gave a critical account of Goldstein's seminal book, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge UP, 2001), which redefines the articulation of gender and militarism. This intersection he argues is a neglected area of research even though the military constitutes the ultimate test of masculinity which it, in turn, manufactures. With a special focus on WWI, Goldstein's book exposes the ideological recuperation of masculinity to serve a political agenda. A myth of "camaraderie" and masculinity was nationalized in the 1910s to justify war-waging, and even in times of peace, the association between masculinity and war is pervasive (i.e. boys' toys in all cultures). The body politic was the *locus* of this myth: the army devised a glorification of the male body to subdue the ravages of the war and encourage enlisting (the fragmented bodies of soldiers were eroticized during the war; disabled men were feminized because they could only perform domestic labor afterwards). The history of the military is highly phallogentric to many feminists; ironically enough, the influx of women on the job market as a result of the war, triggered a crisis in masculinity as men returned home from the front.

Afternoon session – Performing Masculinities & the Body

- 11 Sophie Chapis presented Rick Moody's *Purple America*, a case study novel which focuses on adolescence with a twist since its protagonist, Dexter Allen Ashton Raitliffe, is an awkward middle-aged adult male who stutters, is addicted to alcohol and is described as a "white male oppressor" with women. Regardless, Dexter has come to a watershed in his life and must rethink his actions in light of his dawning adulthood. This accelerated *Bildungsroman* presents Dexter with several models of masculinity to which he does not subscribe. Instead, he reenacts his childhood, is homophobic despite being ambiguously curious and constructs a lackluster cliché of masculinity. Rick Moody tackles the issue of masculinity through sexuality, suggesting that being a man is being able to control one's body, which proves to be an uneasy task for an excessively nostalgic drunken stutterer with sexual obsessions. Dexter's body is the *locus* of his pathologies: it is ineffective, impaired, cursed, and flailing. Dexter's awkwardness is explored clinically; his body is like a chemical agent with unpredictable reactions but it is always explored with a lot of pathos and comedy in this coming-of-age story about the intersection between one's origin and troubled identity.
- 12 Charles Holdefer's "Performing the Curmudgeon" analyzed the understudied figure of the curmudgeon in a variety of forms (literature, film, journalism, popular culture). Unlike its female counterparts, the curmudgeon has redeeming qualities and seems to be an act to preserve dignity in a time of waning powers. Articulated around well-known examples, ranging from H.L. Mencken and Philip Larkin to Frank Zappa, the curmudgeon is a familiar figure whose individuality trumps ideology and escapes simple definitions. C. Holdefer has shown that growing old is a process of reinvention as well as a survival strategy which requires the compliance of an audience.
- 13 By focusing on the works of WWI poets ranging from the most overtly patriotic, such as Rupert Brooke or Laurence Binyon, to the most famously pacifist like Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon, to lesser known figures like Isaac Rosenberg, Anne Guiraud's talk, "No Man's Land: The Crisis of Masculinity in First World War Poetry", has pinpointed and analyzed the drastic deconstruction that the image of the combatant - the very embodiment of masculinity for centuries - has undergone in the course of the war. The traditional *topoi* attached to the soldier were ingrained in a generation of poets brought up in English public schools but jarred with the experience of the war itself. Initially envisioned as an escape from a modernity these men had no desire to experience, the Great War's devastating new horror triggered a disquieting masculinity each poet dealt with in his own way. Eventually, all that was left to see was masculinity drained out of its former values and embodied in the spectral silhouettes of those marginal, shell-shocked men wandering the streets of Eliot's *Waste Land*.
- 14 For more information on the research project, please visit: <http://www.men.univ-paris3.fr/>
- 15 The next seminar will take place on **Friday June 12th, 2009** (Institut du Monde Anglophone, 5 rue de l'Ecole de Médecine, 75006 Paris), and will center on: **Performing Masculinities & Popular Culture and Performing Masculinities & the Artist**
- 16 For more details on the coming workshop, please visit: http://www.men.univ-paris3.fr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=79:forthcoming-events-2009&catid=35:seminars&Itemid=55

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